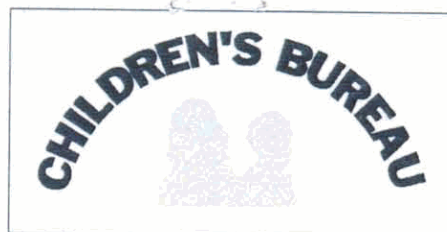


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# Coping With Disasters: A Guide for Child Welfare Agencies

January 1995



Children's Bureau  
Administration on Children, Youth and Families  
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services



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**COPING WITH DISASTERS:  
A GUIDE FOR CHILD WELFARE AGENCIES**

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services  
Administration on Children, Youth and Families  
Children's Bureau

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Preface</b> . . . . .	<b>v</b>
<b>Introduction</b> . . . . .	<b>1</b>
<b>Why This Guide Was Developed</b> . . . . .	<b>1</b>
<b>Key Components of a Disaster Plan</b> . . . . .	<b>2</b>
<b>Elements of an Effective Child Welfare Agency Disaster Plan</b> . . . . .	<b>4</b>
<b>Other Critical Issues To Consider</b> . . . . .	<b>7</b>

### **Appendix**

#### **Selected Resource Materials**



## PREFACE

Child welfare agencies from across the Nation have indicated that they are having difficulties coping whenever disaster strikes their communities. In response, the Children's Bureau called together a group of nationally recognized experts in the field of disaster preparedness and recovery to assist in the development of this guide. The guide is designed to help child welfare agencies prepare for and cope with disasters. The Children's Bureau acknowledges the efforts and invaluable contributions of these individuals. Each has also agreed, if contacted, to answer questions from child welfare agencies on disaster preparedness and recovery.

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## Introduction

Disasters can happen anywhere and anytime. Whether the disaster is natural or man-made, when it strikes, it can cause problems in every phase of life. Although a disaster can impose a severe strain on everything and everyone in a given community, families, and especially the children in them, are a particularly vulnerable group.

For this reason, child welfare agencies need to design specific plans for disaster preparedness and response. This may require some special attention and programs that are necessary to ensure the safety of children and the effective functioning of the agency during disasters.

This guide will assist child welfare agencies in developing a disaster plan and will also serve as a checklist for any disaster plans that may have been previously developed. The use of local child welfare agency staff and community resources, ways to locate foster families, the use of alternative funding sources, the effectiveness of interagency collaboration, and the necessary procedures for receiving disaster relief funds are some of the issues that are addressed in this guide. Clients' lives after the disaster relief assistance has ended are also discussed as part of developing an effective child welfare agency disaster plan.

***This guide  
will assist in  
developing a  
disaster plan  
and serve as  
a checklist.***

This guide is modeled after other publications and guides on coping with disasters. This first section, Introduction, provided information on why this guide was created and how it may be used. The remainder of this guide is organized into four sections, described below.

- **Why This Guide Was Developed** will address the issue of why it is necessary for child welfare agencies to develop a plan for dealing with disasters.
- **Key Components of a Disaster Plan** identifies the critical components of a good disaster plan.
- **Elements of an Effective Child Welfare Agency Disaster Plan** takes a look at the various expectations for and roles of child welfare agencies.
- **Other Critical Issues To Consider** discusses other critical and often overlooked issues that should be included in a child welfare agency disaster plan.

## Why This Guide Was Developed

It is important for child welfare agencies to consider developing specific plans to follow in the event of disasters because of the unique circumstances and legal mandates that surround them and the clients they serve. The plans should be specifically geared for each agency and the unique circumstances that exist in the agency's arena.



During a disaster, the expectations and roles of agencies vary. In the case of child welfare services, the timeframe for preparing and implementing emergency services is short before, during, and after a disaster. This means it is important that a workable and manageable process be designed in advance. This guide offers insights into the various aspects of this process and provides suggestions as to the types of matters that should be considered and, for the most part, included in any disaster plan.

In many instances, the most vital work related to any disaster recovery is the work that takes place long after the initial recovery process has ended. This guide highlights some important issues to remember and some issues that should be emphasized in any child welfare agency disaster plan. Finally, the appendix lists other publications that may be useful in developing a disaster plan.

### *Why Design a Disaster Plan for Child Welfare Agencies*

A child welfare agency could benefit from the design of a disaster plan for many reasons. Some include: Being prepared for an emergency, having procedures for delivering services, being able to assess the damages incurred, and ensuring the safety of as many people as possible. Each of these is reason enough to have a disaster plan ready to implement. However, other factors make having an agency-specific disaster plan beneficial. Among these is the opportunity for an agency to quickly draw down allocated disaster recovery funds and navigate the inevitable road of red tape. A child welfare agency disaster plan is also needed because of the vulnerability of the client population

and the mandates that regulate services. Having an agency-specific plan enables the various programs of an agency to have the capability to respond quickly to problems and needs that follow disasters. This helps restore a sense of calm and control throughout the agency—two critical and important elements needed during an emergency.

When a child welfare agency develops an agency-specific plan, the benefits are more than just being prepared. For example, certain program mandates must always be followed, even during a disaster. Family preservation, foster care, and protective services are a few of the programs that have specific service and program mandates. Documented visits, interviews, case assessments, followup assessments, investigations, home visits, and case monitoring are just some of the mandated service requirements. By creating a process to locate individuals under State jurisdiction in the most trying of circumstances and thereby continue the delivery of services, agencies meet and eliminate delays in establishing a safety net of service to those in need.

### **Key Components of a Disaster Plan**

#### *Reshaping Agency Thinking*

The first step in developing a child welfare agency disaster plan is to reshape the thinking that underlines the service approach. There needs to be a basic understanding on the part of child welfare agencies and staff that during any disaster, everything is different, and they must respond differently. Traditional service delivery and methods of conducting business need to be altered. Agencies must take a proactive



approach to service delivery. Resources and services must be put in place, staff redeployed, and decisions reached in a nontraditional fashion.

### *Identifying Special Needs Clients*

In a disaster, a child welfare agency should be able to identify and locate clients with special needs. Foster families, medically fragile or physically impaired children, families receiving family preservation services, and clients participating in independent living arrangements are some of those who are particularly vulnerable. If a plan has been designed to take into account these and other particularly vulnerable groups, services will reach the clients most in need regardless of the disaster or the geographical area that is affected.

### *Identifying Specially Trained Staff*

A child welfare agency should also be able to identify specially trained staff so that their unique skills can be quickly accessed. Staff, both inside and outside of the agency, who have special skills that could assist clients and the community should be identified, and a process to swiftly access this staff developed. A procedure that can identify and immediately access resources inside and outside affected communities should also be a part of the agency plan.

### *Collaboration and Coordination*

When developing a disaster plan, the child welfare agency should consider the many facets of two important components—collaboration and coordination. Collaboration and

coordination play important parts in an effective disaster relief plan.

For example, identifying the units within a child welfare agency that will be involved in the planning and decisionmaking process and the services that will be delivered are important. Each unit in the agency should identify service areas where it could offer the most assistance. For instance, the family preservation staff could provide emergency crisis counseling, the investigation workers could interview clients at the emergency assistance centers, the family support service staff could help clients enroll and adjust to emergency housing or shelters, and paraprofessionals could assist client families in any number of ways.

In addition, collaborating with other agencies and organizations to organize the most effective response can eliminate duplication in delivering services. Some local agencies such as the health department, school system, and mental health agencies can be part of a collaboration effort. Some national organizations such as the Red Cross, Salvation Army, or Catholic Charities should be included in any collaboration plan. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) would be the Federal agency to include in a disaster relief collaboration.

### *Identifying and Delivering Services*

A disaster plan should identify which services are to be accessed, and it should outline methods to deliver services to a disaster area. The agency should recognize that some existing policies or guidelines may hinder service delivery



and may require special provision or exception status.

### *Identifying Appropriate Staff*

A disaster plan should identify staff members who are to be part of the planning, response, and decisionmaking processes. Also, creating a system by which they can be quickly notified and then mobilized to respond is a critical step. Issues relating to the staff are also critical in the plan.

### *Considering Staff Problems and Issues*

At the same time, thought should be given to the personal problems and issues staff may encounter during a disaster. That is, staff who are involved in providing disaster assistance may experience stress, fatigue, anxiety, personal loss, and property damage. A child welfare agency disaster plan needs to include ways to recognize and address these staff issues and problems. Some possible ways to aide staff through these problems are included in the following section.

### *Designing a Communications Network and a Long-Term Support System*

Two more critical components to include in a disaster plan are a communications network and a long-term support system. These two components not only provide invaluable assistance during a disaster but they are vital components to any recovery and redevelopment effort.

### **Elements of an Effective Child Welfare Agency Disaster Plan**

An effective child welfare agency disaster plan would incorporate varied

important elements, from ensuring that the plan is culturally and ethnically sensitive to ensuring that the plan incorporates engaging the local media in the efforts to educate the disaster victims. Elements of an effective plan are described below.

### *Ensuring Cultural and Ethnic Sensitivity*

An effective child welfare disaster plan should be culturally and ethnically sensitive. Attention should be given in the plan to ensure that individuals and communities in the affected areas are served with respect to cultural and ethnic uniqueness. Consideration should be given to placing bilingual staff in areas where appropriate, as well as distributing food that is culturally familiar. Any messages that are broadcast, telephone hotlines that are used, or fliers that are distributed should be in the languages

used in the community.

***An agency disaster plan needs to address staff issues and problems.***

*Delivering Services to People With Special Needs*

Delivering services to

people with special needs is another issue that child welfare agencies should address. Finding innovative and effective methods of informing and delivering services to special needs clients can be challenging. Any printed emergency information needs to be designed so that individuals with minimal or no reading skills can understand the messages.



### *Providing Services for Individuals With Disabilities*

Services for individuals with disabilities must also be put in place. For example, telephone hotlines should have TTY capability.

Because consistency and routine are major factors in stabilizing the lives of persons with disabilities, agencies

need to, early on, advertise services and make them available. Some services may need to be delivered in the homes of clients until normalcy resumes. Outreach also becomes an important consideration.

### *Delivering Reassurance and Support*

After they have received initial emergency services, many families continue to need reassurance and support. Child welfare agency staff should be prepared for longer visits with clients, as they will need to talk about their disaster experiences. This is a time for staff to help clients understand that their reactions are normal. Patience and active listening can also contribute significantly to long-term recovery of clients.

### *Making Service Access Easier*

Services put in place for the special needs populations are also useful for the

***Disaster plans should describe how the agency's needs assessment and service delivery will be coordinated.***

general population. These include support groups, mobile treatment centers, consultants who are accessible by telephone, and mobile communication networks. All of these make service access easier for people affected by a disaster. In addition, the information child welfare agencies obtain from families through these services can help them quickly deploy key staff to deliver vital services.

### *Enabling Staff To Actively Participate in Community Disaster Teams*

Another effective action for a child welfare agency to plan for is actively participating in a multiagency disaster team. This involvement should start with interagency planning and continue through the service delivery process. The agency would benefit from consulting and coordinating its planning with the State or Regional Office of Emergency Services. In this way, it can help better meet service needs of the community and also help to eliminate any duplication in service delivery.

### *Describing the Agency's Needs Assessment and Service Delivery*

Child welfare agency disaster plans should describe how the agency's needs assessment and service delivery will be coordinated with and housed in the disaster assistance centers established by other emergency organizations. The Red Cross, Salvation Army, and State and local agencies generally establish emergency centers that can serve as multiagency service sites. The emergency assistance centers can house all the agencies that are part of the multiagency disaster team and are actively involved in the process of



delivering services. These centers open immediately or soon after a disaster occurs and are most successful when they are located near the affected disaster area.

Child welfare agency representatives who are part of the community disaster team might suggest that the centers be housed in undamaged buildings (schools, community centers, churches, etc.) in easy to find and reach locations. If necessary and sometimes even more feasible, the centers could be housed in mobile type facilities (trailer, RV, etc.). Whatever the facility, the main objectives of each center are to be easily accessible, provide some emergency services, be a reliable source for information, and serve as a visible sign of disaster relief and child welfare presence in the area.

#### *Setting Up an Administrative Center*

In addition, another center, designed to address administrative and staff issues that arise, needs to be established at a separate location. At this center, multiagency disaster team managers can meet regularly to make programmatic decisions, and the staff providing disaster assistance and relief can "take a break." Ideally, the two centers should be situated in locations that are easily accessible, but not where they would be mistaken for each other.

#### *Making Child Care Available*

Child care should be available at all of the disaster assistance centers and is a vital service that child welfare agencies can provide. It is crucial that parents have an opportunity to apply for needed disaster assistance and receive

information and instructions with the knowledge that their children are being safely monitored. By delivering child care, the centers can offer parents a brief respite from child care and at the same time assess the needs of families and provide direct counseling, stress management, and other services, where appropriate.

#### *Establishing a Communication System*

Establishing a communication system is necessary to provide disaster relief. The system should have the capacity to interface with the State multiagency disaster team network. A part of this system should be a coordinating team. This team must be able to reach and mobilize emergency-trained child welfare staff and provide them with vital information concerning reporting times, location of the reporting centers, and instructions as to the type of assistance to be provided. Information about the availability of child welfare workers to provide assistance should be shared among the centers providing services to enable joint decisions about specific emergency assistance activities.

The communication system should have other significant features. First, it should include a toll-free telephone number that is accessible statewide, or at least region-wide. The communication system should also have a method of informing the public that the telephone line exists, what the number is, and what services will be available. It should be accessible to persons with disabilities and should be available 24 hours a day, for whatever period of time is necessary, immediately following the disaster.



## *Engaging the Local Mass Media in Relief Efforts*

Child welfare agencies need to take an active approach to engage the local mass media in assisting in the efforts to educate, deliver information and important announcements, and serve as an outlet for the dissemination of vital child welfare information. Prepared outlines of news releases likely to be needed after a disaster can help in this effort.

## *Implementing a System To Identify and Involve Staff and Volunteers*

There also needs to be a system to identify, mobilize, and involve the child welfare staff from throughout the State, not just staff in the disaster area. Mutual aid agreements with agencies in neighboring counties are highly recommended. Once child welfare staff from other parts of the State are in the disaster area, a system to rotate local and nonlocal staff through the

service delivery system can be implemented. Staff should not only deliver services but also be a part of conducting

community meetings for the purpose of sharing and gathering information. Another vital component that should be included in this part of a disaster plan is a debriefing process for staff as they complete their tours-of-duty. This provides the disaster response staff and the child welfare managers with

***Volunteers should receive training and become valuable assets.***

opportunities to exchange important information and relieve some disaster-related stress.

In addition to mobilizing nonlocal staff to respond to disasters, the child welfare agency should also identify people who live in the community and other volunteers who might be resources. The people from the community should be, for the most part, recognizable, acceptable, and viable members of each of the affected communities (i.e., clergy, community program staff). Local volunteer agencies can be contacted to assist in the effort to solicit and screen volunteers. These volunteers should receive training and also be encouraged to become valuable assets in emergency situations. A number of these individuals from various communities can be identified, trained, and maintained on file for use in just such a situation.

## **Other Critical Issues To Consider**

### *Treating Child Welfare Staff as Disaster Victims*

Several other important issues should be addressed in a child welfare agency disaster plan. The plan should include a process that treats child welfare staff as possible disaster victims. Staff should be encouraged to design a personal disaster plan that includes collecting emergency supplies for their personal use (home and office) and developing a personal evacuation plan. Staff should arrange to have a personal contact person in another area of their State of residence or another State who will provide information and directions to their family members affected by the disaster. In addition, stress management and disaster



counseling should be available to staff and their families.

### *Training Foster Parents*

A child welfare disaster plan should include training for foster parents, prospective foster parents, and the staff of residential care facilities on what to do if a disaster occurs. Licensed group homes and residential care facilities should have existing requirements to develop disaster plans. Child welfare agencies should design a process to monitor compliance with those requirements. Foster parents should specify where they will go and how they can be contacted if they must evacuate or they become homeless following a disaster. In addition, printed materials from Federal, State, or Regional Offices of the Emergency Services should periodically be sent to foster parents and residential facilities to assist in disaster planning and to update them on procedures to follow and phone numbers to call in the event of a disaster.

### *Allowing a Multiagency Review of Funding*

The agency needs to design a procedure that allows a multiagency review of funding for disaster recovery. Included in the process is a fiscal auditing trail for all expenditures relating to services, goods, and supplies delivered as a result of the disaster. This procedure must incorporate a review of what type of expenditures are billable to the Federal government and which are billable to each agency.

It is strongly recommended that all staff working as emergency workers complete time cards. These can serve as an audit

trail for later reimbursement. This will make the procedure for filing a claim for reimbursement from disaster funds easier

***The agency needs to prepare to practice the plan.***

to support and can also expedite the reporting process. In addition, there should be a review of which services are to be offered by

the local Red Cross, because this can vary from location to location.

### *Practicing the Plan*

Once it designs a plan for disasters, the child welfare agency needs to develop a procedure to practice the plan. The practice drill should include a method of identifying the type of disaster being experienced, the ways to implement various recovery efforts, and how to best mobilize the staff and services to be delivered. Program service staff and managers assigned to disaster duties should be a part of all disaster practice drills. Once the practice drills have taken place, the participants should discuss barriers to effective implementation and offer suggestions that could be incorporated to improve the overall plan. There are some States and counties which conduct multiagency disaster drills. The child welfare agency should be included in these drills.

### *Maintaining the Plan*

It is also important that the agency assign responsibility for the maintenance of a disaster plan once it is developed. This is necessary because far too often plans are developed only to be put aside and

then found to be out of date when they are needed.

For the vulnerable children and families in the child welfare system, a disaster and the increased stress it brings can seriously undermine efforts aimed at family preservation and/or permanency planning. A developed and tested child welfare disaster plan increases the likelihood that the needs of children and their families can be met during this stressful time.



## **APPENDIX**

### **Selected Resource Materials**

## **SELECTED RESOURCE MATERIALS**

### **MATERIALS AVAILABLE FROM:**

Federal Emergency Management Agency  
P.O. Box 70274  
Washington, DC 20024

"Response to Hurricane Hugo and the Loma Prieta Earthquake: Evaluation and Lessons Learned." Federal Emergency Management Agency.

"The Emergency Preparedness Materials Catalog." Federal Emergency Management Agency.

### **MATERIALS AVAILABLE FROM:**

National Institute of Mental Health  
Disaster Assistance and Emergency Mental Health  
5600 Fishers Lane  
Rockville, MD 20857

"Manual for Child Health Workers in Major Disasters." National Institute of Mental Health.

"Training Manual for Human Service Workers in Major Disasters." National Institute of Mental Health.

### **MATERIALS AVAILABLE FROM:**

American Red Cross National Headquarters  
Disaster Services Division  
431 18th Street, N.W.  
Washington, DC 20006

"Natural Hazards Risk Profile: Hurricanes, Floods, Tornadoes, Lightning, and Earthquakes." The American Red Cross.

"Talking Points for Disaster Education Presentations: Earthquake Safety, Flood and Flash Flood Safety, Hurricane Safety, Residential Fire Safety, and Tornado Safety." The American Red Cross.